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ABSTRACT

Opinions of contract grading were received from 51 undergraduate education majors and 28 graduate students majoring in education in Acadia University (Nova Scotia, Canada). Students at both educational levels reacted to contract grading in a clear and decisivly positive manner. They agreed that the grading system and assignments were made clear from the beginning, that the system was appropriate, and that grades were assigned fairly. When asked to rank the effectiveness and importance of the various aspects of contract grading, students reported that the key elements were the control they felt they had over the determination of their grades, the clearly stated expectations for performance in the course, criterion referencing of assignments, and the mastery approach to learning. An appendix describes contract tasks required for successful completion of a sample course, and another appendix contains the survey questionnaire. (11 references) (JD)

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STUDENT REACTION TO CONTRACT GRADING

by

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of evaluation in education, especially the awarding of grades in courses, is a complex one that has generated much controversy. Surprisingly, the practice of awarding grades for student performance is a relatively recent one having developed in response to the compulsory schooling legislation in the United States in 1870. Previously, evaluation procedures tended to be based on students' ability to perform in clearly identifiable skill areas such as the martial arts, debating, music and recitation. Even the priviliged few, educated during the middle ages, although rigorously examined, were deemed either up to the task or not; in effect they were graded on a pass/fail basis. Students choosing trades were apprenticed to a master tradesman and after instruction over varying periods of time were judged to be competent or not. This apprenticeship form of teaching was clearly based on what we today call the mastery approach.

With the advent of compulsory schooling, educators were faced with the problem of coping with large numbers of students of obviously differing abilities. The need for differentiating, screening and predicting, all characteristic functions of traditional norm based grading procedures, quickly became apparent. The most common response was to develop a grading scheme based on percentages with a previously determined pass level. Later this practice was refined to reflect the principles of the normal curve where a predetermined number of students always failed, a similar proportion always excelled and the rest were spread between the two.

Criticism of these methods was not long in coming. A landmark study by Starch and Elliott (1912) revealed the highly subjective and unreliable nature of such procedures. Their study involved having two English papers graded by 142 different English teachers, a scale of 0-100 was used with 75 being a pass. On one paper the grades ranged from 64 to 98 and from 50 to 97 on the other, a range of 34 and 47 points respectively. One of the papers was failed by 15% of the teachers while the same paper was given 90 by 12% of the teachers. The expected criticism that the variation was due to the subjective nature of English was soundly rejected by further studies of Mathematics (Starch and Elliot, 1913) which revealed even greater variations (range of 67) and of History (Starch and Elloit, 1913a) which produced results consistent with the first two studies. The unreliability of teacher awarded grades has been demonstrated repeatedly since that time (Simon and Bellanca, 1976).

Not only have teacher awarded normative grading procedures been found wanting but the supposed benefits of such procedures have not been realized. Evans (1976) conducted a thorough review of the literature on grading and concluded that such grading schemes have little value as predictors of either future academic or professional performance, nor do they have value as a motivational technique.

One of the responses to the ongoing controversy over grading techniques has been the search for alternatives to the traditional forms of evaluation. Contract grading is one such alternative and it employs, interestingly, the pass/fail and mastery techniques inherent in evaluation in the middle ages, thus in a sense coming full circle. Contract learning and contract grading have become staples of adult education and considering the generally more mature post baccalaureate student in our B.Ed. programs, such an approach to evaluation in education courses merits examination.

The purpose of this presentation then, is to briefly describe contract grading, examine student reaction to it and assess which aspects of contract grading are perceived by students to be effective.

Contract Grading Described

Most definitions of contract grading are deceptively simple. Frymier (1965) defines contract grading as a process whereby "one student and one teacher together spell out in writing exactly what will be accomplished during a period of time for a particular grade" (p. 253). He elaborates by saying "The contract is a mutually agreed program of learning covering certain common and certain different experiences for each student, specifying particular times and dates and forms, and predicated upon the assumption that the teacher should teach and the student should learn." (1965, p.253). Harvey describes contract grading as ". . . a businesslike arrangement whereby the instructor defines the performance for each grade, and . . . is committed to awarding this predetermined grade if the student attains the appropriate performance level." (1972, p.42). According to Kirschenbaum, Simon & Napier ". . . the contract system means that if a student does a certain type, quantity and, ideally, quality of work, he will automatically receive a given grade." (1971, p.298).

Essentially then, contract grading is a system where specific tasks are clearly defined and arranged in a hierarchy from simple to complex with corresponding grades attached. Students work at the tasks, which are graded as either pass or fail, until they are mastered, receiving the grade associated with the mastered tasks. The tasks may be assigned by the instructor for all students with modifications by individual students allowed after consultation, or the tasks may be developed on an individual basis by the student and instructor together. Some contracts provide for both instructor assigned and student developed tasks.

The following is an excerpt from a course outline which describes to students how the contract works:

> A form of the contract system of grading will be the basis of evaluation in this course. The contract system is a criterion referenced approach whereby your grade is tied to the satisfactory completion of certain tasks. These tasks are arranged in a hierarchy in accordance with Bloom's Taxonomy of education objectives for the cognitive and affective domains. The higher the grade the higher the qualitative level of the task you must satisfactorily complete. This method of evaluation will provide you with exposure to an alternate form of evaluation to the traditional methods you've experienced. It provides a clear statement of what is expected of you in the course and it minimizes the emphasis on exams as a major determinant of grades. The following provisions comprise the contract:
>
> 1) I will decide whether or not a task has been satisfactorily completed. An "S" indicates satisfactory, a "U" indicates unsatisfactory.
>
> 2) In the event your completion of a task is unsatisfactory I will explain why and indicate what is necessary in order to re-do the task. You may then re-do the task and submit it before the deadline for the submission of all work. There is no limit to the number of times you may re-do a task.

3) In the event your completion of a task gives evidence of superior performance you will receive an S+. If you receive S+ on all the tasks you complete your final grade will be "bumped" one notch (i.e. from a B to B+, or C+ to B-). If you receive an S but desire an S+ you may re-do the task to try and improve your performance. Again, there is no limit to the number of times you may attempt a task.

4) The tasks are cumulative, that is in order to receive credit at say the B level, you must satisfactorily complete all tasks at the previous levels plus the B level task(s). Your final grade will reflect the highest level for which you have satisfactorily completed all tasks.

5) You may propose substitutes to any of the tasks assigned especially if your alternative is more personally relevant. However, any substitution must require at least the same level of functioning on Bloom's Taxonomy as the original and must have my approval.

6) You can expect a one class turnaround time from the submission of an assignment to having it returned to you. The only deviation from this arrangement might occur near the end of the course if I am swamped by assignments from procrastinators. In any event you will never have to wait more than two classes to have your assignments returned.

7) The final deadline for submission of all work including re-done tasks is indicated on the course schedule.

The rest of the course outline then goes on to describe in detail the tasks at the various grade levels. An example from one of the courses from which students reactions were solicited is found in Appendix A. It is important to note from the above exerpt the significant elements of this contract. Specifically, the contract promises a clear statement of expectations for the students in the course, utilizes the mastery approach to learning, is criterion referenced, minimizes the emphasis on exams, accomodates superior performance within an essentially pass/fail system, allows for individualization via substitutions for instructor assigned tasks, promises quick feedback on assignments and places control over grades primarily in the students' own hands.

Student Reaction to Contract Grading

Little literature assessing contract grading exists and most of what does focuses on whether or not students view the system favourably. Not surprisingly most studies report favourable student reaction (Brederman and Haggerty, 1980; Parks and Zurhellen, 1978; Taylor, 1971). However, no studies can be found which address the question of what aspects of contract grading are considered by students to be effective. Two questions then arise: 1) Do students view contract grading as described above favourably; i.e. do they like it? and 2) What aspects of contract grading do students find most effective; i.e. what do they like about it? To begin answering these questions, the opinions toward contract grading of students in two of the presenter's courses were solicited. One course (two sections) was at the B.Ed. level, the other at the M.Ed. level.

Sources of Data

Answering the first question was approached by reviewing the course evaluations completed by students in the two courses. Course evaluations for B.Ed. students in the School of Education at Acadia consist of three parts; one section contains questions which are common to all courses, a second section is composed of questions from a menu selected by individual professors to reflect more specifically the aspects of a particular course. Questions in the first two sections are answered by choosing one number from a 1-5 Likert type scale with 1 representing strongly disagree through 5 representing strongly agree. The third section is open ended and students are asked to indicate what they considered to be the strengths of the course, the weaknesses of the course, and any other comments. Course evaluations from fifty one (51) B.Ed. students were returned. The M.Ed. course evaluation form had only two sections, one being composed of instructor selected questions answered via the five point Likert type scale and the other an open ended section where students were asked "What did you like most about this course/professor"?, "What did you like least about this course/professor?", and "Any other comments/suggestions?". Course evaluations from twenty eight (28) M.Ed. students were returned.

In order to answer the second question, what aspects of contract grading do students find effective, a questionnaire was developed through which students were asked to rank order the eight elements of the contract grading system they had experienced in the course. The elements identified for ranking were :- criterion referencing, the mastery approach; the provision for 'bumping' a grade due to surperior work; the substitution provision; the control students had over their grade; quick feedback; the de-emphasis or elimination of the final exam; and the setting of clear expectations for the course. Students were then asked to rate the importance of each element using a five point Likert type scale with 1 representing not at all important and 5 representing extremely important. Forty four (44) usable questionnaires from the B.Ed. students were returned and twenty eight (28) usable questionnaires were returned by M.Ed. students. A copy of this questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

Results

Question 1: Do students view contract grading favourably?

Four items that addressed the issue of grading practices were selected from the course evaluations completed by B.Ed. students. The first three items appeared in the section common to all courses and the fourth appeared in the instructor developed second section of the course evaluation. " Mean ratings by B.Ed. students on the five point Likert type scale for each question are presented it Table 1. A score of 5 represents the rating "strongly agree", 4 "agree", 3 "neither agree nor disagree", 2 "disagree, and1 "strongly disagree".

Table 1
Ratings by B.Ed. Students (N=51)

Item from course evaluation	Mean Rating
12. Assignments & grading system clear from beginning	4.80
14. Grading system appropriate for course.	4.49
15. Grades assigned fairly & impartially	4.50
32 Procedures for determining grades satisfactory.	4.37

Three items that addressed the issue of grading practices were selected from the M.Ed. course evaluation form. Although not completely identical to the four from the B.Ed. course evaluation a high degree of similarity exists. Mean ratings by M.Ed. students on the same five point Likert type scale for each of the items are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Ratings by M.Ed. Students (N=28)

Item from course evaluation	Mean Rating
14. Work requirements & grading system clear from beginning	4.90
16. Grading system appropriate for course	4.90
17. Grades were assigned fairly	4.90

All the comments from the open-ended section of the B.Ed. course evaluations were reviewed and any that related to contract grading were recorded. Comments from the questions "What did you like most?" and "Any other comments" that were positive reactions to contract grading are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Comments from B.Ed. students on strengths of course

-I liked the contract manner of evaluation
-The contract system is very effective
-Contract system is a great idea and method of grading although a lot of work was entailed to get an A.
-The contract system
-The contract
-Contract system is excellent and takes off a lot of stress because of no exam.
-Contract system is a progressive and invaluable manner of evaluation, it places responsibility on the student.
-I appreciate the contract system of evaluation
-Emphasis on assignments, not the exam, takes pressure off
-The contract system
-Contract
-Contract system allowed self direction, flexibility and de-emphasized grades.
-The contract system.

Comments from the B.Ed. students concerning the weaknesses of the course and comments from the "any other comments" section that were unfavourable regarding contract grading are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Comments from B.Ed. students on weaknesses of course

-Work load in contract was too heavy
-Assignments at lower level tasks were more difficult than those higher up.
-Contract system hard on procrastinators.
-Contract system
-Need dates for certain levels in contract to be turned in
-Need due dates for contract system for procrastinators
-Contract system doesn't provide optimum motivation

Similar procedures were utilized regarding the comments of M.Ed. students and the results are presented in Table 5. Although the specific directions asked M.Ed. students what they liked most and least about the course, the heading in Table 5 reflects those of Tables 3 and 4. No comments from the weakness section regarding contract grading were found nor were any unfavourable comments regarding contract grading found in the "any other comments " section.

Table 5
Comments from M.Ed. students on strengths of course

-Contract evaluation process was excellent
-The evaluation methodology was clearly laid out and as objective as possible
-The contract system which encouraged you to attempt everything
-Contract system of grading
-Marking scheme fair

Question 2 What aspects of contract grading do students find most effective?

The rankings by B.Ed. students of the aspects of the contract system and the importance they assigned to these rankings are presented in Table 6. Included in this table are the eight aspects in rank order, the mean rank score and the mean score for importance. A score of 5 represents "extremely important", 4 "very important", 3 "moderately important", 2 "not very important", and 1 "unimportant".

Table 6
Effectiveness and importance rankings by B.Ed. students (N=44)

Aspect	Rank	Mean Rank	Mean Importance
Control	1	2.81	4.18
Expectations	2	3.22	3.95
Mastery	3	3.72	3.90
Exam	4	4.09	3.77
Criterion Ref.	5	4.38	3.70
Feedback	6	5.61	3.45
Substitution	7	5.75	3.54
Bump	8	5.81	3.47

Exactly the same questionnaire was completed by the M.Ed. students. Their rankings are presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Effectiveness and Importance rankings by M.Ed. students (N=28)

Aspect	Rank	Mean Rank	Mean Importance
Control	1	2.60	4.17
Expectations	2	2.82	4.17
Criterion Ref.	3	3.89	3.42
Feedback	4	4.10	4.03
Mastery	5	4.78	4.10
Exam	6	4.89	3.71
Bump	7	6.17	3.57
Substitution	8	6.89	3.07

As both B.Ed. and M.Ed. students answered the same questionnaire the results for the two groups were combined. These combined rankings are presented in Table 8.

Table 8
Effectiveness and importance rankings for all students. (N=72)

Aspect	Rank	Mean Rank	Mean Importance
Control	1	2.73	4.18
Expectations	2	3.06	4.04
Mastery	3	4.13	3.98
Criterion Ref.	4	4.15	3.59
Exam	5	4.40	3.75
Feedback	6	5.02	3.68
Bump	7	5.95	3.51
Substitution	8	6.19	3.36

Discussion

A quick inspection of Tables 1 and 2 reveals a consistently positive reaction to the contract system of grading. The lowest mean rating was 4.37 and five of the seven were above 4.5. Students at both the B.Ed. and M.Ed. levels agree that the grading system and assignments were made clear from the beginning, that the system was appropriate and that grades were assigned fairly. One can only speculate as to whether similar scores would be reported by students in a traditionally evaluated course but that is beside the point as the intent is not to prove whether one system is superior to another but simply whether contract grading is considered by students to be a viable method of grading.

The comments of B.Ed. students from the open ended sections of the course evaluation presented in Table 3 support the favourable reactions to contract grading already discussed. Although these comments essentially speak for themselves, it should be noted that nine of the thirteen comments express simple approval, two refer to the reduction of stress and two refer to student responsibility. There were also unfavourable comments as reported in Table 4. It is interesting to note that of the seven unfavourable comments three related to the desire for due dates/ difficulty for procrastinators.

Comments from the M.Ed. students presented in Table 5 reflect those of the B.Ed. students. It is noteworthy that no negative comments concerning contract grading were made by M.Ed. students. Overall then, both B.Ed. and M.Ed. students react to contract grading in a clear and decisively positive manner.

Pursuing student reactions to contract grading further, it is revealing to discover what aspects of contract grading are considered effective and how important these aspects are in the minds of students. From the point of view of B.Ed. students the aspect of control over one's grades is the number one ranked aspect of contract grading and this is reflected in the rankings of M.Ed. students, as well as the combined B.Ed./M.Ed. rankings. The same is true of the number two ranked aspect, that of clear expectations. These two aspects complement each other, of course, for the clearer the expectations, the more likely it is that the student will be able to meet them and thus control their grades. Both the control and expectation aspects also received high ratings in importance. Students considered them to be "very important" according to the mean scores on importance.

The mastery aspect provides some food for thought. While it is ranked third by B.Ed. students it drops to fifth when ranked by M.Ed. students. But M.Ed. students seem to ascribe more importance to it than they do to either criterion referencing or feedback, although it is dangerous to attribute much significance to differences of .07 and .68 in mean rankings on a five point scale. Nevertheless, the differences in rankings by B.Ed. and M.Ed. students cannot be ignored and probably represents greater academic self confidence on the part of M.Ed. students.

Criterion referencing was ranked third by M.Ed. students but fifth by B.Ed. students. This difference, consistent with the difference in ranking of the mastery aspect, may again reflect greater academic self confidence by M.Ed. students. As long as they clearly understand the criteria, M.Ed. students feel confident in accomplishing the task while B.Ed. students may rely more heavily on having the opportunity to redo the task.

When B.Ed. and M.Ed. rankings are combined, the four aspects of control, expectations, mastery and criterion referencing appear and in that order. Thus, in spite of some variation by B.Ed. and M.Ed. students in their ranking, the aforementioned aspects clearly emerge as key provisions of contract grading as the students experienced it.

The two aspects of the exam (de-emphasis or elimination) and feedback vary in their ranking from fourth to sixth. One might expect feedback to have a ranking reasonably close to the mastery aspect as the two are tied together logistically. A real surprise came with regard to the ranking for the bump provision. The bump aspect had been developed to try and counter an inherent shortcoming of pass/fail systems, namely that no differentiation in quality of work meriting a pass is possible. This obviously does not seem to be nearly as great a concern to students as it has been to the presenter. This is further supported by the fact that very few students ever redo tasks that are graded S (satisfactory) in order to get S+. Finally, the substitution aspect, which, along with the bump aspect, is ranked either seventh or eighth, is no surprise as experience has shown that very few students take advantage of this provision. This may be due to the assigned tasks being percieved as relevant and/or interesting, or simply because students are too busy to create their own tasks.

A glance at the mean scores for importance in Tables 6, 7 and 8 reveals that no single aspect of the contract system received a score lower than 3.07 and of the 24 scores reported, only four were below 3.50, two of them being for the substitution aspect. Thus it is safe to say that virtually all aspects of contract grading are considered to be important and that the four top ranked aspects are considered by students to be very important.

Summary

The results of this study confirm the positive evaluations by students of contract grading reported in the literature. Further, this study reveals that when asked to rank the effectiveness and importance of the various aspects of contract grading, students report that the key elements in terms of both effectiveness and importance, are: the control they feel they have over the determination of their grades, clearly stated expectations for performance in the course, criterion referencing of assignments and the mastery approach to learning.

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APPENDIX A

Description of Tasks

C- (60) level 1 & 2 cognitive	(1) Attend every class, participate fully in class activities, and complete all homework assignments.
C (65) level 2 cognitive level 1 affective	(1) Successful completion of C- level task. (2) A reaction paper based on literature in the professional journals. Select any topic related to communications and human relations. Find three journal articles relating to the topic and write a one to two page paper reacting to the articles. You must include a photo copy of the abstract of each article. If an abstract is unavailable you must write one yourself or photocopy the whole article. Two especially helpful references for this task are Psychological Abstracts and Dissertation Abstracts International.
C+ (68) level 3 cognitive level 2 affective	(1) Successful completion of C level requirements. (2) Using your recent student teaching experiences provide an example of a situation where you either applied successfully (or should have applied) effective human relations skills. Give enough details to allow me to understand the situation and be sure to explain why what you did (or should have done) was helpful. OR (3) Volunteer at the Acadia Child Development Centre, Professor Scholz's Gym/Swim program, Waterville or any other worthwhile cause. You will need to provide a note for me at the end of the term from your supervisor attesting to your commitment and present a brief description of how you applied effective human relations skills.
B -(71) level 3 cognitive affective	(1) Successful completion of C+ requirements. (2) Complete any three "try this" activities in the textbook from level 2 the following list. p. 21, 31, 38, 62, 63, 66, 70, 128, 133, 152, 178, 191, 200, 214, 217, 223, 231, 231(3 words), 234 (5 words), 238, 260, 268, 285, 291, 293, 295. Note: no more than one activity from any one chapter may be utilized.
B (75) level 4 & 5 cognitive	(1) Successful completion of B- requirements. (2) Write a paper reviewing the results of eight to ten articles from the professional literature on any topic relating to communications and human relations. You may include the three articles utilized in the C level task. Be sure to follow the criteria in levels 4 and 5 of Bloom's Taxonomy. OR (3) Successful participation in SCAMP '90 (Secondary Curriculum Adapted Materials Project). Participants will be expected to develop 8 to 10 pieces of material to the satisfaction of the project leaders - Professor Margie Brown and Dr. Jim Fasano and at

least 3 of these pieces must have a direct "self-esteem" component. A commitment to participate must be made by February 12 and the project leaders will hold an information meeting prior to that date.

B+ (78)
level 5 affective

(1) Successful completion of B requirements.
(2) Prepare a personal awareness/committment paper. Based upon the class activities, homework assignments class activities, etc. identify three aspects of your self/behavior you'd like to change. Describe the behavior giving illustrations of why it has been unsatisfactory. Explain why you think you've been engaging in it. Give a complete description of how you intend to change the behavior. Be as specific as possible and use real life situations whenever appropriate to illustrate how you plan to implement the change(s).

A- (84)
levels 4&5 cognitive

(1) Successful completion of B+ requirements.
(2) Participate in the Hants West District School Board Day Camp Program. This program will run in the spring between the end of exams and convocation, specific dates will be announced early in the term. The program requires your involvement as a team member in planning and organizing an introduction to school/ pre school screening for youngsters who will be entering school next fall. If you are a final year integrated student you may get credit at this level by preparing an evaluation of your team's program. Mr. Hirsch will provide the details.

OR

(3) Participate in a research project. Full details will be provided later but in outline the project involves interviewing one person regarding the significant others in their lives in an effort to better understand how we positively affect others. The interviews will be audio-taped and you will need to transcribe the tapes and identify themes/trends/patterns that tend to emerge. A meeting will be held within the first half of the course to provide further details.

A (90)
levels 5&6 cognitive

(1) Successful completion of A- requirements.
(2) Undertake a project of some form. At this level the ideas should be generated by you but vetted and approved by me. This project may take a number of forms and may be done individually or in groups.

A+ (95)

This grade is reserved for students who have successfully completed the A level task and have done consistently high quality work throughout the course and is awarded purely on a subjective basis.

APPENDIX B

DIRECTIONS:

Listed below are the key elements of the contract systems I have employed over the years. Each element is briefly explained. Please rank the order of each element according to your perception of how important it was relative to the others in making the contract system effective. (1. being most important, through 8. being least important). Then please indicate the extent to which each element contributed to the effectiveness of the contract system by checking the appropriate box under the second column. Finally, please complete the questions on the next page which solicit basic demographic data.

	RANK	EXTENT OF IMPORTANCE
	In order of importance from 1 (most) to 8 (least)	Extremely imp. 5 Very imp. 4 Moderately imp. 3 Not very imp. 2 Unimportant 1 (Circle one for each)
Criterion Referencing - the tying of your grade to a clearly described task or assignment	_____	1 2 3 4 5
Mastery Approach - the opportunity to re-do work that wasn't initially satisfactory.	_____	1 2 3 4 5
The "Bump" Provision - the chance to have work that consistently exceeded "pass" standards recognized by a one step increase in grade level. i. e. **C + TO B -**	_____	1 2 3 4 5
The Substitution Provision - the chance to substitute tasks of your own for these assigned by the instructor.	_____	1 2 3 4 5
Control Factor - the fact that you could pretty well decide what grade to go for.	_____	1 2 3 4 5
Speedy Feedback - the normally one class turn-around time for return of marked assignments.	_____	1 2 3 4 5
Exam De-emphasis - either the pass/fail aspect and low grade level attached to final exams or the elimination of final exams.	_____	1 2 3 4 5
Clear Expectations - knowing at the onset, what was required so you could plan your work over the semester.	_____	1 2 3 4 5